



The Experience of a Lifetime

In early September 2002, backcountry hikers in Kings Canyon National Park had the experience of a lifetime. While walking the high elevation trails north of Dusy Basin, they observed a lightning-caused fire burning naturally in the wilderness, eventually spreading over 1,300 acres.

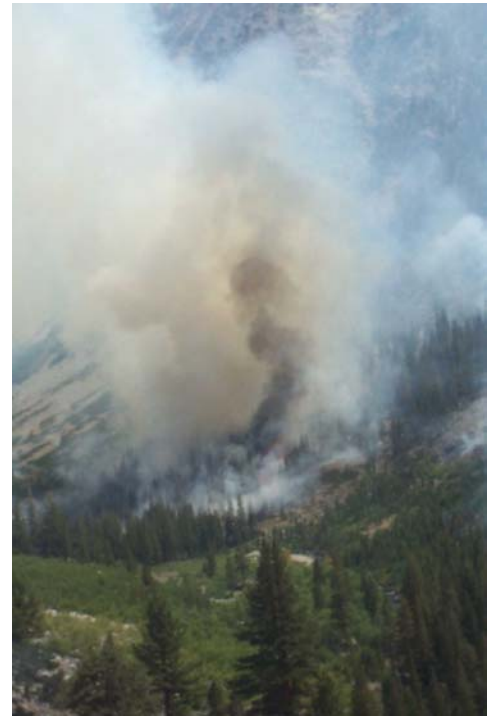
It all began a few days before the Labor Day weekend when a park trail crew discovered the Palisade Fire burning on both sides of the popular John Muir/Pacific Crest Trail. Committed to improving forest health and maintaining natural processes, park managers chose not to suppress the fire but rather to manage it as a fire use project. But a question remained about how to manage the busy trail over the holiday weekend.

In the past, fire managers always closed trails near fire operations, often for extended periods of time until it was safe to pass. In these cases, hikers would be rerouted or denied access into certain areas. But the Palisade Fire was different.

Park staff and volunteers were stationed as “sentries” at both sides of the fire to restrict trail access. When firefighters on scene felt it was safe, hikers were escorted daily through the 4-mile fire area. This not only prevented a lengthy detour but it also gave those visitors a first-hand experience with a fascinating natural process. It was an ideal example of how to balance visitor needs and safety with ecosystem restoration.

Opportunities to see and learn about fire operations this summer were not limited to remote backcountry areas. Visitors driving and/or hiking in the front-country, like Giant Forest, had the chance to watch fire crews ignite a handful of prescribed fires. Park educators were available on scene to ensure safety, answer questions, and explain the larger goals and context for what people were seeing. This season, rangers personally talked with nearly 3,000 visitors in active fire areas.

Of course Sequoia and Kings Canyon educates visitors and neighbors about fire in a variety of traditional ways, too. Interpretive programs, press releases, documentary films, and community newsletters are combined with roving interpretation to take fire education to the next level.



“This is the most incredible thing I’ve ever seen!” -- a Kings Canyon National Park visitor after being escorted through the Palisade Fire in September of 2002.